



February 7, 2023
Lucy Nolan, Policy Director

Committee on Children

In support of SB 929 An Act Expanding School Meal Programs to Provide Free School Meals to All Students

Senator Maher, Representative Linehan, Senator Seminara, Representative Dauphinais and members of the Committee on Children. My name is Lucy Nolan and am the policy director at End Hunger Connecticut! a statewide anti-hunger advocacy and programmatic organization. I am here today to testify in favor of SB 929 An Act Expanding School Meal Programs to Provide Free School Meals to All Students.

School Meals for All CT is part of a national movement to ensure that breakfast and lunch is available to all Public-School students. During the pandemic the USDA began the successful program by feeding students at schools when as many children were going hungry when schools were closed. The program ended in June of 2022. The Connecticut legislature funded the program for parts of this year. But the funding didn't go far enough and now, meal counts are down while meal accounts are up.

Twenty-four states currently have legislation to reinstate permanent universal school meals. Three states, Maine, California and Colorado continued the program permanently. Locally, Vermont, Massachusetts, and New York are among other states that like Connecticut are working to legislate permanent universal meals. Three Governors have included universal school meals in their budgets this year, Michigan, Minnesota and New Mexico. In just over a month our pledge of support has over 700 organizations and individuals who want this in Connecticut.

We are working with our sister states to develop the best bill as possible. At the end of my testimony is language we believe should be included in the bill in addition to the provision of no cost breakfast and lunch for all Public-School students in Connecticut.

1. Encouraging schools to draw down the maximum amount of federal funding through the Community Eligibility Provision or Provision 2 in order to ease the state's need.
2. A permanent and robust Farm to School program.

We learned when all students regardless of income is welcome the playing field is leveled. School lunch participation increased for students who were previously eligible but didn't participate. Prior to the pandemic one in four eligible students did not eat school meals. And once the funding ran out this year many reverted back to the old fears and we are seeing a sharp decrease in participation. For some they are embarrassed and for others they are not sure their lunch balance is paid up to date since families are just making it these days. The stigma they feel is so great that kids would rather go hungry than show that they cannot afford the school meal. The cafeteria became the one place where kids felt equal in school. In fact, studies show with universal school meals students feel safer and report less bullying and fighting at school and in the cafeteria. And there is less absenteeism.

According to the Connecticut United Way's latest ALICE report (2022) there are 305,00 or 42% of Connecticut children whose families earn just enough to not be eligible for basic needs programs but not enough to make ends meet. Students who are eligible for SNAP, TFA, Medicaid and in foster care are automatically enrolled in free meals at their school. In real numbers that means a family of four can earn no more than \$36,075 *gross* income in a year. That same family needs an income of \$90,000 to meet the threshold to make ends meet. To be eligible for reduced-price meals that family cannot earn more than a gross income of \$51,338. That's a huge chasm between eligibility and just making ends meet. There just isn't enough money in the family budget to pay the approximately \$20 per week lunch costs per student.

To minimize the need for state funds we are asking that schools maximize their ability to draw down federal dollars available for them for free and reduced priced meals. There are several mechanisms for this from the Community Eligibility Provision and Provision 2, programs that increase federal funding and decrease administrative responsibilities freeing up local funding for other programs such as farm to school.

You will also find language to increase participation in Connecticut's very popular Farm to School program. A program that gives students the chance to learn about local access to food while bringing it to their cafeteria at the same time and helps our local farmers through the purchasing of their locally grown goods.

Finally, I want to bring to your attention a video in the testimony of Ashley Clark, the Food Service Director at Plainville Community Schools. I sent it to you all yesterday and I urge you to watch it. It is a

compelling attestation by students explaining why school meals for all is so important to them. You can also find it here: [Plainville Community Students talk School Meals for All](#)

When we invest in education we must invest in this very basic need. School meals should be as integral a part of a student's education just as textbooks and transportation are. There should not be an income eligibility test.

A hungry child cannot learn. A hungry child cannot be healthy. A hungry child needs support to succeed. We can give our students what they need.

Thank you.

Suggested language revisions:

Section 1

(c) The State Department of Education shall reimburse each regional and local board of education, the Technical Education and Career System or governing authority of a state charter school, interdistrict magnet school or endowed academy that made available both school breakfast and lunch to students at no charge under subsection (c) of this section for the cost of each meal provided in the district during the previous quarter that qualifies as a paid breakfast or paid lunch under the federal school breakfast and federal school lunch programs. Reimbursement from State funds shall be available only to the regional and local board of educations, Technical Education and Career System or governing authority of a state charter school, interdistrict magnet school or endowed academy that maximize access to federal funds for the cost of the school breakfast and lunch program by participating in the Community Eligibility Provision or Provision 2 of these programs, or any other federal provision that in the opinion of the Agency draws down the most possible federal funding for meals served in that program. Federal reimbursement for a free meal as defined by the United State Department of Agriculture.

CGS Sec 10-215I CT Grown for CT Kids Grant Program

(g) The CT Department of Education, in consultation with the CT Department of Agriculture, (1) shall establish a program to reimburse school food authorities for money spent to purchase food from

local farms (A) school food authorities shall be reimbursed \$1 for every \$2 a school food authority purchases in CT Grown Product and (B) shall be reimbursed \$1 for every \$3 purchased from regional vendors where the product originates no more than 400 miles from the final point of sale. (2) only school sponsors of the National School Lunch Program shall be eligible for reimbursement. (A) school districts may purchase food directly from farms, farmers' cooperative, food hubs, as well as wholesale distributors, (B) the place of origin shall be confirmed through self-attestation from the originating producer, or any other means required by the federal government or the CT Department of Education, School Health, Nutrition and Family Services. (2) The department shall make rules on the specifications and qualifications for eligible foods including, (A) value-added dairy, fish, pork, beef, poultry, eggs, fruits, vegetables, and minimally processed foods, and (B) shall define for the purposes of this statute “socially disadvantaged farmers” and “small farm business”.

(h) All food items purchased through the program shall comply with federal Child Nutrition Program guidelines. (1) Funding can support local purchases for the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), School Breakfast Program (SBP), Seamless Summer Option (SSO), After School Snack and Supper Program and School Food Authority sponsors of Summer Food Service Program participants. (2) School districts shall receive a maximum total of funds available based on student enrollment. (3) Products shall be reimbursed with priority funding going to districts that purchase from socially disadvantaged farmers or small farm businesses.

(i) School Food Authorities who are National School Lunch Program (NSLP) sponsors and accessing local food incentive funds are eligible to apply for supplemental grant funds to purchase kitchen equipment, engage with school nutrition or farm to school consultants, and provide training to process, prepare, and serve local foods. The department shall give priority to alliance district applicants.

(j) The department shall employ a Farm to School Coordinator to develop and implement the program whose responsibilities include: (1) identifying and promoting the critical components of individual Farm to School Programs and advising the department of education on needed actions and strategies to implement the Connecticut Local Food For Schools Incentive Program, (2) support partnerships with public and nonprofit sources to establish a structure to facilitate communication between farmers and school districts, (3) providing leadership at the state level to encourage school food authorities to develop and improve school nutrition plans using locally grown farm-fresh products, (4) conducting workshops, training sessions, and technical assistance to school food services directors,

personnel, farmers, and produce distributors and processors regarding the demand for and the availability of Connecticut farm products, and (5) seeking grants from private donations and other funding sources. (6) The department shall develop an annual survey to be distributed to school districts in order to collect data to improve the program.

(k) The sum of \$250,000 for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2024 is hereby appropriated to the department of education, school health, nutrition and family services for a Farm to School Coordinator, to design the local food incentive program. The sum of \$1.5 million dollars for the fiscal year ending June 30, 2025 is hereby appropriated to the department of education, office of nutrition programs and services, to initiate the local food incentive program including implementing the evaluation and providing district technical assistance. \$1 million dollars of such appropriation shall be used for reimbursement for local food purchases. The sum of \$250,000 shall be appropriated for grants to meet school food authority needs for kitchen equipment, engage with school nutrition and farm to school consultants, and provide training to process, prepare, and provide local foods. Any moneys not spent by the program shall not lapse.